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ABSTRACT

Navaho Indians learning English tend to use two versions of the language: classroom English and an informal dialect spoken outside school. The sounds of Navaho are imposed on spoken English, and the phonological deviations produce morphological and syntactical errors. Mistakes in verb tense and in singular and plural suffixes are common. The value of teaching English as a second language is questionable; perhaps it should be taught as an alternate dialect, and teachers should cite economic opportunity as motivation to learn. Navaho students were tested for their ability to recognize and use comprehension clues in reading English; results indicate that reading skill rests on oral linguistic competence. Teachers could use a knowledge of linguistics to improve their language instruction. (CK)

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DORMITORY ENGLISH

Implications for the Classroom Teacher

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DORMITORY ENGLISH

Implications for the Classroom Teacher

How do teachers of American Indians perceive their students' performance in English? And how do they perceive their own performance in teaching English to American Indians? This paper comments on these questions preparatory to exploring alternatives to current interpretations of the English language scene in schools for Indians, and then proceeds to recommendations toward achieving both a clearer view and a more effective performance of the teaching/learning task.

I am using the term "Dormitory English" to mean the variant of English spoken by Indians living in and around a reservation. The term was used by Dr. Robert E. Wilson of U.C.L.A. in his C.I.T.E. (Consultants in Total Education) materials for teaching English as a second language. In early dialogues about everyday situations, Dr. Wilson presented each subject in three versions, telling the children: "This is how you would say it in Navajo; this is how you would say it when you talk to your friends in the dormitory; this is how you would say it in class," thereby offering the children an insight into the social roles of "home language" versus "school language," each a perfectly valid system within the proper context.

Not all speakers of Dormitory English live in dormitories; many live at home and attend day schools; many are adults who, as children, may or may not have lived in dormitories; others are adults who never went to school at all and learned English informally. Of course it would

be interesting to investigate in what way the dialect (as well as the total linguistic and cognitive development) of students living in dormitories differs from that of students attending day schools, but such speculations lie outside the scope of this paper. Interested persons will look forward to Dr. Muriel Saville Troike's proposed comparative study of the proficiency of Navajo Dormitory and Day School students in their own native language. Further study will be needed to determine whether the results correlate with the students' performance in English.

The observations and research reported in this paper derive from my work on the Navajo Reservation, where I have been a consultant in many schools, in daily contact with children, aides, teachers, and administrators. The general implications, mutatis mutandis, apply to educational factors existing in most Indian classrooms, regardless of specific problems of individual tribes or individual teachers.

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The slow progress of Navajo youngsters is often a source of puzzlement to their teachers of English; as the years go by, and the students are promoted to higher grades, the situation does not improve and the teachers experience great frustration in seeing that the students have learned so little, and do not seem to care any more. The English spoken by a Navajo pupil, even after years of schooling, may strike the teacher's ear as highly accented, mispronounced--almost to the point of unintelligibility--and grossly incorrect.

Navajo is a tone language; its four vowels are unglided, and may be nasalized. Glottal stops are frequent; most other consonants are seldom

found in word-final positions, and consonant clusters are rare in any position. A speaker of Navajo who learns English superimposes his own sound system on the sounds of English. Some of the resulting phonological deviations will also cause the speaker various morphological and syntactical difficulties. He may not be able to hear or reproduce the final consonants or consonant clusters that signal plurality; after he becomes able to hear them, he will still tend to omit the proper signals, and consequently will appear to violate the rules of agreement in number between subject and verb. It is quite interesting to find, even at the high school level, the frequent occurrence of sentences such as "Yesterday he drove to the school and talk to the principal," which parallel certain stages of child grammar.

Other highly predictable deviations from Standard English grammar found in Dormitory English are, for example, the marking of mass nouns for plurality (you may find store signs that advertise "Furnitures" or "Jewelries"), and the double tense carrier such as "Did you ate?", especially with strong verbs. The lack of distinction between "he" and "she" also exists, but has become limited to the younger age group. It becomes the object of peer-group ridicule around the end of the second grade, and tends to disappear.

The linguistically naive teacher may accuse the pupils of lazy enunciation and lack of concepts, just as many of her colleagues are doing in a Black ghetto school. She may concentrate on teaching irregular rouns and verbs to pupils who still have problems with regular ones. Yet the Navajo pupils' English has highly predictable features which

the teacher could help with, if she had enough information, instead of clinging to the security of her own background in "correct" usage, and aiming at the eradication of "gots" and the distinction between "can" and "may."

An introduction to the rudiments of linguistics and the techniques of second-language instruction may be very helpful at this stage, but it might also open the door to a whole new set of problems and misconceptions. Teachers who have had an introduction to linguistics and to the second-language-teaching techniques of the audio-lingual school may tend to place excessive trust in the remedial power of phonology. If only they could keep students interested in minimal pair drills, they feel, the problems would be solved. Yet the problem does not get solved, and the blame is placed on the students' lack of motivation. As a matter of fact, I have found very few students beyond the very early grades who could not hear the difference between "cat" and "cats" and who were unable to produce the two words when asked to do so; yet many of the same students did not mark the difference in their speech, and did not add the "s" suffix in their writing.

In most cases, the deviations briefly hinted at in this paper are present in varying degrees in the speech of persons who learned English after learning Navajo, and could, therefore, represent different plateaus of what Harry Selinker in The Psychology of Second Language Learning calls "interlanguage." Students of foreign languages stop improving when they reach a point of comfortable equilibrium where the new language serves all their needs as they see them, and further efforts

would be uneconomical. Students will be motivated to greater improvements only if they change their perception of advantages or disadvantages connected with their linguistic proficiency. Armed with this knowledge, the teacher of Indians could capitalize on the fact that several remunerative and prestigious jobs once reserved for Anglos are now held by qualified Indians. When made aware of this, some students may begin to imagine themselves in similar positions, and be willing to change their language to fit their new vision.

On the other hand, Dormitory English is also now spoken by persons who have never been taught Navajo. Their deviations from Standard English cannot be ascribed to interference from their native tongue; we are witnessing the birth of a new dialect. Among its speakers are many adults, whose parents wanted to spare them the trials of bilingualism; included also are the offspring of these adults. Most of the monolingual speakers of Dormitory English live near the borders of the Reservation, or close to the highways that traverse it. There are of course many variations within their dialects, according to age, sex, education, and other influences. Eventually, the Dormitory dialect will acquire for its speakers the special affective value which is part of the speaker's self-identity and self-concept. I have not personally found evidence of such attachment to the Reservation dialect among Navajos, probably because the Navajo language is still very close to them, very much alive. When those Navajos who speak only English feel a strong need to save their ethnic identity, they learn the Navajo language. This situation is different from that of the Blacks, who do not have a separate language

to identify with, and direct their allegiance to the Black dialect.

Looking for pedagogical implications in what has been so far discussed, one might suggest that teachers of Indians who come to school as dominant speakers of an Indian language should learn up-to-date ways of teaching English as a Second Language, and that teachers of children who come to school speaking Dormitory English should find out all they can about teaching Standard English as an alternate dialect. However, should ESL continue to be taught to children who come to school speaking mostly Navajo, but who have been using English as a medium of instruction and communication for several years? They are not likely to benefit from the second-language techniques available at the present time. ESL should probably be discontinued for most pupils at the end of the primary grades. It might be replaced by the teaching of Standard English as an alternate dialect, or dropped altogether in favor of emphasis on communication and cognitive and creative activities which are valuable in any language or any dialect. If the ESD option is chosen, teachers will find it both easier and more difficult than ESL. In ESD, students and teacher can communicate with each other without too much trouble, but instruction in particular grammatical problem points is difficult, and materials (and even recommendations on how to conduct instruction) are still scarce and experimental.

If Dormitory English is viewed as an alternate dialect, the much-deplored "lack of transfer," evidenced by children who produce correct sentences for the teacher but revert to their own way of speaking as

soon as they leave the classroom, can be understood as the ability to switch from "school talk" to "dormitory talk" depending upon the circumstances, a very useful skill. The change of perception that was suggested for motivating second-language learners to a higher plateau of linguistic achievement can be used to motivate speakers of Dormitory English to master Standard English as a key to a better future. Finally, in the field of reading instruction, we can benefit from experiences of people who have been teaching reading to Black children.

Because of the phonology of both dialects, oral reading tests (including informal inventories) are not valid unless special adaptations are made; teachers will have to beware of treating surface differences as evidence of lack of comprehension, or worse yet, of deficient conceptual development. In 1971 I conducted a small experiment designed to study the relationship between Navajo students' accuracy in oral reading and their comprehension. I designed a test which was given to fifty randomly selected fourth and fifth graders enrolled in regular classes at Shonto Boarding School on the Navajo Reservation. The test consisted of sentences containing nouns in plural forms, and sentences containing verbs in the past tense. For the sake of brevity I shall describe here only what happened regarding the plurals; the section on past tenses led to identical conclusions. The first group of sentences consisted of items such as "They ate the bananas," "He saw the monkey," "The boys rode to town," with plural nouns in subject and object positions. The only clues for plurality were the suffixes on the nouns. The children were asked whether we were talking about one or more than one banana,

monkey, boy, etc.; finally, they were asked how they could tell. Some pupils pronounced the plural morphemes, some did not, and some read them correctly for only part of the items. All students, however, correctly identified the plural nouns; when asked how they knew, they either said "s" or "no s" without hesitation.

The next group of sentences contained items such as "The boy walks to town," "The girls draw with crayons," containing information about number in both the subject and the verb. In their oral reading, pupil read the noun phrases with approximately the same level of correctness as before, but they were much less accurate in producing the suffixes on the verbs. When asked whether we were talking about one or more, they again gave accurate answers; when asked for evidence, they always referred to the marker on the noun phrase, disregarding the redundant clue in the verb.

The third portion of the test contained sentences such as "The sheep drinks water," "The deer run fast," "My sheep likes grass." The majority of students did not pronounce the third-person-singular morpheme. When questioned about the number of sheep and of deer in each sentence, all but two were perplexed and seemed to grope for contextual information or background knowledge (more students classified the sheep as plural than the deer, perhaps because the former are more frequently seen in quantities). When asked the reason for their answer, the students were at a loss; confronted with the "s" suffixes on the verb, many said "more than one" even if it meant reversing position.

The experiment confirmed what I had assumed from my informal

observations of the children's reading behavior; they could recognize a plural noun on the printed page even if they did not pronounce its final sound. When reading orally, most of these children were translating written Standard English into their own dialect, as many Black children also tend to do.

The experiment did not explain, however, why the children who did so well in recognizing plurality in nouns did not pick up information from the third-person-singular morpheme. Much research is still needed into how readers recognize and use comprehension clues. It is fortunate that scholars such as Kenneth Goodman of Wayne State University have given much attention to this area and are beginning to gather data on the use of comprehension clues by second-language learners. As part of my own research for insights into the reading comprehension of Navajo pupils, I have been testing them using the Cloze techniques.

I shall briefly describe one such experiment, executed and recorded by Mrs. Lorene Shough of the Tuba City Public Schools. Mrs. Shough was a student in one of my graduate classes in 1971, and conducted the tests with her third and fourth grade pupils, most of whom had started school with Navajo as the dominant language. Cloze tests consist of reading selections from which every nth word has been deleted. Students are asked to replace the missing words (one word per blank) in a way that is both meaningful and correct. Cloze tests have been used rather extensively in recent years, but not with young children. In 1973, Richard Stahl, in preparing his doctoral dissertation at Northern Arizona University, has given Cloze tests to first and second graders.

He offered multiple choices for the blanks. I did not want to do so, since I was interested in finding out what the pupils would come up with on their own. I quote Mrs. Shough's work as representative, but have done several other such studies, with similar results.

The Tuba City test controls two variables that affect reading comprehension: the ability to decode words, and familiarity with the background of the story. Mrs. Shough had the children select two pictures that interested them, and then talk about them. Using the children's own comments, she compiled two brief stories and made them into Cloze tests by deleting every fifth word. The first story was about a cat, a mouse, and some cheese; it was used to acquaint the pupils with the testing procedure. The second story, about a boy and a cow, became the actual test. The students were quite familiar with the contents of the story and we made sure that they could call out all the words it contained before the test was administered. During the test, the students were permitted to change their answers if they changed their minds about them. Any acceptable substitutes for the original words were considered correct, and most of the pupils did very well; however, at least eight of the fifty filled some of the blanks with unacceptable choices, the kinds of choices, moreover, that would hardly have occurred to any native speakers of English. Here is the test, followed by a list of the items considered unacceptable.

The Boy and the Cow.

This is a cow. __1__ cow gives us milk. __2__ cow is big and __3__. The boy likes his __4__.

Unacceptable fillers:

for 1:	for 2:	for 3:	for 4:
Boy	Boy	having	ride
Cows	In	milk	bull
	like	feed	water
	To	ing	
	He	cow	
		boy	
		little	
		bigger	

Although the fillers for #4 produce a grammatical sentence, we rejected the answers because they are extraneous to the rest of the paragraph.

The students who produced unacceptable fillers were all very poor readers, in Mrs. Shough's appraisal. One cannot help wondering what these students' performance might have been if they had had the opportunity of learning to read in their own language, over which they had better control. The bilingual solution might alleviate a number of cognitive and psychological difficulties for the beginning learner, but for the moment it is not applied widely enough to relieve English teachers of their responsibilities. They will have to establish priorities about what should take up these students' time and what should be discarded.

Every classroom activity has to be examined in the light of how much it contributes to the students' cognitive development, their emotional growth, and their creative expression. Excessive emphasis on pronunciation, spelling, and isolated word-attack skills--even correctness--is trivial by comparison. A heavier dose of phonics is not going to help Mrs. Shough's "slow readers." The ability to understand what one reads rests first of all upon the reader's linguistic competence. Teachers of second-language learners must themselves learn this truth

and its implications for them. They need to emphasize oral language before they teach reading, and as essential preparation to reading. Oral language competence, however, goes much farther than ability to perform pattern drills or to have "good enunciation."

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What can linguists, whose work is by now specialized to the point of appearing esoteric, really contribute towards the goals of sound language teaching? Actually, a great deal. Information about language in general and about the dialect of Indian students, information about the sequential nature of language acquisition, and about the process of reading could be very helpful, especially if accompanied by practical suggestions on how to apply this knowledge to improve instruction. Unfortunately, few linguists are in a position to formulate such suggestions on the basis of actual experience with the reality of the classroom. We need more education, both in universities and on-site, in applied linguistics for both linguists and teachers. Better yet, we need teacher-linguists. Such training should help alleviate a current situation in which linguists lack teaching experience, and teacher trainers, particularly in reading, lack linguistic knowledge that is up-to-date.

It still remains for knowledgeable teachers to test the feasibility and effectiveness of all suggestions, and either accept or reject them. In any case, some knowledge of the principles of linguistics could produce a shift in teachers' attitudes so that they themselves could devise their own ways of modifying instruction. They will then look more

objectively at the facts of language, and observe how it develops, how it changes, and how the students actually use it, and for what purposes. Objectives such as the ability to distinguish between "shall" and "will," or to produce the /ɸ/ sound in father, mother, and brother will be placed in proper perspective, for such items are, at best, unimportant bits and pieces of major patterns of communication. Such bits and pieces are not going to help the students to understand the world around them, or to think at the abstract level necessary in a technological world; they won't even help them decide to what extent they want to participate in the culture that produced it.